

# Working Boomers:

## *Looking Back and Leaping Forward*

Throughout this issue of *Trendlines* you will find articles outlining the impact of Baby Boomers on our economy and, indeed, our society. This generation of Americans is, in many ways, different from those who came before it. However, are they really that different when it comes to the kind of work they do? Intuitively, we might assume that occupations of workers ages 43 and above (the youngest Baby Boomers turn 43 this year) have changed much in the last century. Certainly the economy of the United States has changed drastically in 100 years and we would expect this to impact the opportunities of Baby Boomers. But, is this really the case?

To explore this issue of occupational change over time for people ages 43 and above, we will use Census microdata from 1900 and 1950 constructed by the Minnesota Population Center's amazing IPUMS program and the latest 2006 microdata from the American Community Survey.


Before we can get started though, it is important to note that, when looking at historical Census data, occupational titles from any given year may differ wildly. For example, in 1900, a cooper (barrel maker) was an important occu-

pation. But by 1950 the occupational coding structure didn't have a need for coopers as that occupation had largely disappeared. The same holds true, in reverse, for new occupations that didn't exist in the first half of the century, but are prominent now: for example, computer programmers, network analysts, and biochemists.

Looking at the top ten largest occupations for men and women 43 years old and over in 1900, 1950, and 2006 we see some interesting trends. Perhaps most telling is that farmers no longer dominate the labor market of the United States. In 1900, a very large number of men and women in the Baby Boomer-like age group were farmers or, at the very least, worked on a farm as laborers. Another changing trend is that male Baby Boomers today are much more likely to work in management positions than in the past, when trade employment was more evident. While some trade occupations have remained important throughout the century for men—carpenters, for example—most have seen their share of employment decline.

For women, there has, interestingly, been a lack of change in some of their top occupations. A quick look at the

top ten occupations for the three years selected show that for women, “pink-collar” jobs have played a dominant role throughout the past century. For example, nurses, teachers, secretaries, maids, and housekeeping workers appear in nearly every list. And, while men have increasingly found employment in the highest ranks of management, the largest management occupations for women have been first-line supervisors and managers of office and administrative workers, and of retail sales workers (in a sense, managing workers in occupations also largely dominated by women).

What are we to make of this? Well, it is important not to read too much into a simple exercise such as this one. Clearly, people sharing the same age as today's Baby Boomers have worked in many different occupations over time. However, it is also clear that there has been an interesting—perhaps unnerving—amount of continuity of some trends, especially for women. What will the future hold for today's Baby Boomers? That is hard to say, but it is likely that in 50 years people will look at data from this era and remark at how quaint the occupational mix was. 

*While men have increasingly found employment in the highest ranks of management, the largest management occupations for women have been first-line supervisors and managers.*

## Top Occupations for Men Ages 43 and Above



Time Period	Occupation
1900	
	Farmers and planters
	Laborers (n.e.c.)
	Agricultural laborers
	Carpenters and joiners
	Employees of railroad companies
	Miners
	Draymen, hackmen, teamsters, etc.
	Blacksmiths
	Traders and dealers (n.e.c.)
	Painters and varnishers
1950	
	Farmers (owners and tenants)
	Managers, officials, and proprietors (n.e.c.)
	Operative and kindred workers (n.e.c.)
	Laborers (n.e.c.)
	Salesmen and sales clerks (n.e.c.)
	Clerical and kindred workers (n.e.c.)
	Carpenters
	Farm laborers, wage workers
	Foremen (n.e.c.)
	Mechanics and repairmen (n.e.c.)
2006	
	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers
	Miscellaneous managers including postmasters and mail superintendents
	Janitors and building cleaners
	First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers
	Chief executives and legislators
	Retail salespersons
	Carpenters
	Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing
	Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand
	First-line supervisors/managers of construction trades and extraction workers

*Note: (n.e.c.) denotes a group of occupations that can't be specifically identified due to the constraints of the occupational structure used. Source: Minnesota Population Center, IPUMS data; American Community Survey.*

Top Occupations  
for Women on the  
following page

## Top Occupations for Women

### Ages 43 and Above

Time Period	Occupation
1900	
	Farmers and planters
	Domestic servants
	Launderers and laundresses
	Milliners, dressmakers, and seamstresses
	Boarding- and lodging-house keepers
	Agricultural laborers
	Nurses
	Teachers and scientific persons
	Laborers (n.e.c.)
	Officials and employees of trade and transportation companies (n.e.c.)
1950	
	Operative and kindred workers (n.e.c.)
	Private household workers (n.e.c.)
	Salesmen and sales clerks (n.e.c.)
	Clerical and kindred workers (n.e.c.)
	Teachers (n.e.c.)
	Managers, officials, and proprietors (n.e.c.)
	Stenographers, typists, and secretaries
	Bookkeepers
	Service workers, except private household (n.e.c.)
	Cooks, except private household
2006	
	Secretaries and administrative assistants
	Registered nurses
	Elementary and middle school teachers
	Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks
	Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides
	Retail salespersons
	Maids and housekeeping cleaners
	Cashiers
	First-line supervisors/managers of office and administrative support workers
	First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers

*Note: (n.e.c.) denotes a group of occupations that can't be specifically identified due to the constraints of the occupational structure used. Source: Minnesota Population Center, IPUMS data; American Community Survey.*



women